DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 393 239 EC 304 683

AUTHOR	Karlin, Shary; Harnish, Dorothy
TITLE	An Evaluation Assessment of the CrossRoads Alternative Schools in Georgia (Focus Groups).
INSTITUTION	Georgia Univ., Athens. Coll. of Education.
SPONS AGENCY	Georgia State Dept. of Education, Atlanta. Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment.
PUB DATE	Jul 95
NOTE	60p.; For a related case study, see EC 304 682.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Attitudes; *Behavior Disorders; Community; Nontraditional Education; Program Administration; Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; Public Schools; Qualitative Research; Secondary Education; *Special Schools; State Programs; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS	Focus Groups; *Georgia

ABSTRACT

This report describes results of focus group evaluation of the first year of Georgia's CrossRoads program, an alternative public school program to provide chronically disruptive, committed, and/or non-attending students (grades 6-12) with the social services and individualized instruction they require and to make the public schools more secure by removing chronically disruptive students from the regular classroom. The program served over 3,400 students across the state during its first year. Eighteen focus group meetings were held with students, administrators, and teachers (in separate groups) in CrossRoads programs at 6 sites. The focus group data revealed two main themes: the importance of community, including the properties of program as community, program connections to the outside community, and perceptions of the outside community; and program administration, including the properties of commitment, flexibility, student selection and placement, transition and reintegration, and affective and academic changes. Recommendations urge that: (1) criteria for defining and indicating program effectiveness be developed; (2) program information clearly defining mission, goals, and purposes be disseminated; (3) possibilities for staff development be investigated; and (4) issues of transition and integration be investigated. Appended are maps, the focus group protocol and interview questions, and information forms used. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 393 239

An Evaluative Assessment of the CROSSROADS ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA

(FOCUS GROUPS)

Dr. Shary Karlin
Research Specialist

Dr. Dorothy Harnish
Project Coordinator

Occupational Research Group
School of Leadership and Lifelong Learning
College of Education
The University of Georgia
Athens, GA

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
D. Harnish
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

July 1995

Prepared under contract with the Georgia Department of Education,
Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment,
Atlanta, GA 1995

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

5030483

Title: Georgia's Statewide Alternative School Program: A Qualitative Evaluation

Georgia has recently initiated a major statewide educational initiative to address the needs of chronically disruptive youth. The purpose of this alternative school program, known as CrossRoads, is: a) "to provide chronically disruptive, committed, and/or non-attending students with the social services and individualized instruction and/or transition to other programs they need to become sucessful students and good citizens in the school and larger community", and b) "to make the public schools more safe and secure by removing chronically disruptive students from the regular classroom". The CrossRoads program is directed by a broad collaborative of state physical health, mental health, social service and education agencies. Eighty-nine CrossRoads school programs for students in grades 6-12 were funded in 1994-95, serving over 3,400 students across the state. Nearly $17 million has been spent in the first year of this program. Because of the scope of this initiative, the speed of its implementation, and its ambitious goals, there is a strong interest among multiple stakeholders in the evaluation of CrossRoads' first year efforts, to provide information about the students being served and about the effectiveness of the program.

As part of a statewide accountability and evaluation plan for CrossRoads, qualitative research was carried out by the Georgia Department of Education, in conjunction with the Occupational Research Group at the University of Georgia, during spring 1995. The goals of this research were: a) to provide information about the effectiveness of the CrossRoads program, as perceived by students and educators at sites involved in the study; b) to increase knowledge about participant perceptions of program impact, strengths and weaknesses; c) to identify issues for further research and a focus for future evaluation studies; and d) to develop a qualitative research model for evaluating the CrossRoads program which can be used with quantative approaches in the statewide evaluation process. The qualitative evaluation findings reported here are being used, together with descriptive quantitative data collected from CrossRoads sites through a computer-based data system of recordkeeping and a survey questionnaire, to address questions of program impact and effectiveness.

A series of 18 focus group meetings were organized and conducted in spring 1995 with students, administrators and teachers in CrossRoads programs across the state. Teams of trained facilitators from the University of Georgia and the Georgia Department of Education met with program participants in 18 one-hour group interview sessions at six regionally dispersed locations during a two week period. Separate focus group meetings were held for students, administrators and teachers at each of the six research sites. Questions asked at each focus group session included: a) How well is the program working? b) What works and doesn't work and why? c) What needs to be improved and how? and, d) How has the program impacted students? Meetings were audio tape recorded, and the tapes transcribed verbatim to provide the data for

subsequent analysis and interpretation. In addition, two CrossRoads programs, identified by state department staff as examples of "successful" programs, were visited by the researchers who conducted interviews with program participants and observed programs in operation. The data collected during two days at each site using case study methods provided additional descriptive information about the programs and identification of issues for further study.

Qualitative methods of data analysis were used. These included reading transcripts, coding and sorting data to identify emerging themes, categories and properties, and identifying relationships among student and staff perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about how the program was working and what made it effective, program outcomes and impact, and recommendations for improvements. Transcripts were analyzed across participant groups (students, teachers, administrators) and across the six regional sites. Analysis of information from the focus groups resulted in identification of several themes that defined the program and suggested areas for further research. These themes were: Community - program as community, connections to the outside community, perceptions of the community; and Program Administration - commitment, flexibility, student selection and placement, transition and reintegration, and affective and academic changes. The report also describes a number of "success stories" which center on social, academic, and personal growth of students served by the program.

Georgia's efforts represent an attempt to foster a fundamental change in the traditional educational paradigm. CrossRoads targets a diverse group of students and families through a coordinated and collaborative support system in order to enable students who have been "written off" in traditional schools to become productive members of the local community and larger society. The research findings have implications for developing policy and educational practice directed toward serving at risk students in Georgia and elsewhere.

Table of Contents

Title	*Page*
List of Tables	4
Acknowledgments	5
Introduction	6
Methodology	8
Design of the Study	8
Sample Selection	9
Collection of the Data	11
Analysis of the Data	13
Limitations	14
Findings	15
Community	16
Program Administration	27
Additional Finding	35
Success Stories	35
Summary	38
Conclusions and Recommendations	38
References	43
Appendix A: State CrossRoads Regions	44
Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol	46
Appendix C: Focus Group Interview Questions	49
Appendix D: Sign-Up/Demographic Information Forms	52

List of Tables

No.	*Title*	*Page*
1	State Regions by Type	8
2	Student Participant Grade Level by Region	9
3	Number of Focus Group Participants by Region and Type	10
4	Categories and Properties	14

Acknowledgments

This project is the culmination of the involvement and cooperation of several individuals and agencies. We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the following people at the Georgia Department of Education: Dr. Laura W. Henderson, Senior Educational Staff Specialist, Office of Research, Evaluation and Assessment; Dr. Sandy Blair, Alternative Schools Program, Student Services Unit; and Ms. Diana Harper, Alternative Schools Program, Student Services Unit. We would also like to thank Dr. Richard Lynch, Director, School of Leadership and Lifelong Learning, The University of Georgia; Dr. Ray Anukum, Program Specialist, Occupational Research Group, The University of Georgia; and Dr. Iris Smith, Georgia Department of Children and Youth Services, for their assistance with conducting the focus group interviews. We would like to recognize the efforts of L. Earle Reybold who assisted during the data analysis process.

In addition to those mentioned above, we wish to thank the Georgia Cities in Schools Regional Facilitators for their help setting up the focus group meetings and providing us access to the Regional Service Centers. We gratefully acknowledge the Georgia Power Company and Waynesboro Bank for allowing us the use of their facilities for our focus group meetings. And, most importantly, thank you to the participating CrossRoads Alternative Schools Program administrators, teachers, counselors, and students who agreed to be interviewed for this project. We are grateful for the time you spent with us and the insights you shared.

Shary L. Karlin
Dorothy Harnish
July, 1995

An Evaluative Assessment of the
CROSSROADS ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA

Introduction

This report describes the outcome of an exploratory evaluative assessment of the CrossRoads Alternative Schools Program for the Georgia Department of Education. This assessment is part of a statewide evaluation of the CrossRoads Alternative Schools Program (hereinafter referred to as the CrossRoads Program or Program) which is being conducted after the first year of the Program's operation. The purpose of the assessment was to conduct a series of focus groups throughout the state of Georgia with stakeholders involved in the Program (i.e. program administrators, counselors, teachers, and students). The intent of these focus groups was:

1) to provide information about the effectiveness of the CrossRoads Program, as perceived by students and educators at sites selected for study;

2) to identify issues for further research and a focus for future evaluation activities;

3) to increase knowledge about participant perceptions of program impact, strengths, and weaknesses, and how to improve program operations; and

4) to develop a qualitative research model for evaluation of the CrossRoads Program which can be used with quantitative approaches in the statewide evaluation process (Department of Education Assessment Proposal, 1995, p. 1).

The assessment was conducted by the staff from The University of Georgia (UGA) College of Education's Occupational Research Group (ORG) and the Georgia Department of Education (DOE). Support staff included research assistants, administrators, and clerical personnel from the Occupational Research Group and The College of Education's School of Leadership and Lifelong Learning. Assistance

from Georgia Cities in Schools regional facilitators was employed to make focus group interview site arrangements and contact CrossRoads Program administrators, teachers, counselors, and students with details about the meetings.

The project was conducted in four phases. The first phase involved the planning of the research methodology, the identification of the research team and the identification of categories or types of CrossRoads Programs to be used in selecting the participant sample. The research team consisted of professional staff from the Alternative School Program Office, the Research, Evaluation, and Assessment Office at the Georgia Department of Education and The University of Georgia's Occupational Research Group. Additionally, one employee from the Department of Children and Youth Services in Atlanta participated on the research team during the data collection period. Research assistants were added later to assist with the analysis of the data.

The second phase of the project consisted of developing and implementing a focus group methods training program for the research team, developing the focus group interview questions, contacting the regional site facilitators, and scheduling and arranging the focus group interview sessions.

Phase three, the data collection phase, was conducted during a two week period. The research team was divided into two person data collection teams with one person functioning as moderator and the second as an assistant moderator. The combined teams conducted a series of eighteen focus group interviews, three in each of six regions of the state.

The fourth and final phase of the project was the transcription, analysis and interpretation of the data collected from the eighteen interviews. The data included transcripts and field notes from each of the focus group interviews. This phase also included the preparation of the final report. A draft of this report was reviewed by members of the research team prior to its submission to the State Department of

Education. The following sections of this report describe the research methodology employed in conducting the study, the findings of the investigation, and conclusions and recommendations for program improvement or further study. A list of references and the appendices comprise the final section of the report.

Methodology

Design of the Study

In keeping with the purposes of this exploratory evaluative assessment project as outlined in the Proposal, the project focused on providing insight and preliminary data regarding:

- How well the Program is working;
- What works and what doesn't and why;
- What needs to be improved and how; and
- How the Program has impacted students.

The design of the study was qualitative in nature. The development of the design was accomplished through a collaborative effort between the staff at The University of Georgia's Occupational Research Group and the staff at the Georgia Department of Education. Several initial planning meetings were scheduled between staff members from ORG and the Senior Education Staff Specialist from the Georgia DOE. At this time, it was determined that a research team consisting of members of both the ORG and the Georgia DOE would be involved in conducting focus group interviews to collect data from stakeholders across the state who were involved with the CrossRoads Alternative Schools Program. Additionally, one member of the research team was associated with the Georgia Department of Children and Youth Services. It was felt that her interest in the project and her background working with troubled youth, in conjunction with her past experience conducting focus groups, would enhance the research effort.

Sample Selection

The participant sample was comprised of three groups of Program stakeholders: CrossRoads program administrators, counselors and teachers, and students. Participants from each of these groups were selected from six state CrossRoads regions outlined by the staff of the Georgia DOE at one of the initial planning meetings (See Appendix A). These regions were identified as primarily rural, primarily urban, or mixed as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. State Regions by Type

Region	*Type*
Region I	Rural
Region II	Mixed
Region III	Urban
Region IV	Urban
Region V	Rural
Region VI	Mixed

A decision was made to recruit 9-12 members from each group (CrossRoads program administrators, counselors and teachers, and students) from within each region to participate in the focus group interviews. In order to ensure student participants were recruited from all grade levels in the Program, it was decided to request that students from specific grade levels be recruited from certain regions. This was also important because some regions of the state did not have programs spanning both middle and high school. Additionally, we requested no more than two students be recruited from a single program. The selection of varying regions and grade levels was based on a maximum variation sampling strategy. This strategy requires the researcher to select participants by "purposefully picking a wide range of variation on dimensions of interest" (Patton, 1990, p. 182). The researchers were interested in obtaining student participants from all grade levels and regions of

the state. Consideration was also given to the age of the students, the amount of travel time needed to reach the focus group sites, and the distance from the school to the focus group sites. The intent in selecting the participant sample was not to be able to generalize the findings to all CrossRoads Programs, but to look for "information that elucidates programmatic variation and significant common patterns within that variation (Patton, 1990, p. 172). Table 2 displays the regions and grade levels selected for student focus group interviews.

Table 2. Student Participant Grade Level by Region

Region	*Grade Level*
Region I	Grades 6 & 7
Region II	Grades 8 & 9
Region III	Grades 10, 11, & 12
Region IV	Grades 6 & 7
Region V	Grades 10, 11, & 12
Region VI	Grades 8 & 9

Georgia Cities and Schools regional facilitators from each of the six regions of the state were identified and contacted by Georgia DOE staff to assist with recruiting participants, obtaining meeting sites, and coordinating the logistics of the focus group meetings. Their contacts and relationships with those at the CrossRoads Program sites proved invaluable for recruiting participating sites. The facilitators were asked to contact administrators at CrossRoads Programs within their region, provide them with information about the focus group interviews, and invite them to have their schools participate in the study. Facilitators were instructed to ask their contacts at participating sites to select no more than two teachers and/or counselors and two students from any one site to attend the focus group interview sessions. Regions II & VI were asked to send only teachers and no counselors.

Additionally, the facilitators were asked to identify and schedule a convenient

and neutral site for the meetings (preferably not in a school), provide participants with maps to the sites, arrange for refreshments, arrange for activities for students who had to wait for their teachers or administrators to complete focus group interviews before transporting them back to the schools, and perform other tasks as needed. The majority of the focus group sessions took place at Georgia DOE School Service Centers. Table 3 provides information about the number of actual participants in the study by region.

Table 3. Number of Focus Group Participants by Region and Type

Region	*Administrators*	*Teachers/Counselors*	*Students*
Region I	10	10	10
Region II	11	7	10
Region III	11	9	11
Region IV	4	11	11
Region V	2	1	3
Region VI	5	5	9
Total	*43*	*43*	*54*

Total Number of Participants = 140

Collection of the Data

As mentioned previously, data was collected from the CrossRoads administrators, counselors and teachers, and students during a series of eighteen focus group interviews conducted throughout the state. Prior to collecting the data, the research team members participated in a focus group training program. The purpose of this program was three-fold. First, it served to bring together all the team members and inform them about qualitative focus group interview methods. Second, it enabled collaboration on developing the protocol and interview questions to be used in the focus group interviews. Third, it ensured the consistent use of data collection methodologies and protocols.

The training session was facilitated by a consultant from The University of Georgia. The program consisted of background information about focus group research, an introduction to focus group research methods, and a short focus group session. Handouts and other resource materials were distributed to the research team members. The focus group session was designed to get the team involved in the methodology as well as to begin to generate questions to be used for the actual research interviews.

During this session, the research team was divided into three groups. Each group focused on developing research questions for one of the CrossRoads stakeholder groups. These questions were later edited and revised. Additionally, the protocol for conducting the focus group sessions was outlined. This protocol was used to inform the research participants of the purpose for the research and the "ground rules" of the sessions (See Appendix B). Following this session, the team members were given their focus group interview assignments. The materials developed at the training sessions were revised and sent to the teams prior to the date of the focus group interviews.

When the research teams arrived at the interview sites, the tables in meeting rooms were arranged in a rectangular or U-shaped arrangement. Each moderator and assistant moderator team were to arrive at the site early, arrange the room, and set up one or two tape recorders with microphones for recording the sessions. The site facilitator set up refreshments and supplied tent style name cards on which participants wrote their first names only. Prior to the session, as the participants arrived, the moderator and assistant moderator made notes. When all of the participants arrived and were seated, the protocol (See Appendix B) was followed. Participants were thanked, informed of the purpose for the focus group, and given the ground rules. They then participated in an introduction and warm up exercise. Following that, the first question was asked. Each interview session lasted

approximately 1 1/2 - 2 hours. The interview questions can be found in Appendix C. Sign-up/demographic information forms (See Appendix D) were distributed to focus group participants either prior to or immediately following the sessions. These forms were used to collect some general demographic data as well as to identify those participants who would need reimbursement for travel. Following the interview sessions, the moderator and assistant moderator found a quiet place to write additional field notes about the session.

The interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the participants. In some instances, second backup recordings were also collected. The tapes were transcribed verbatim and analyzed.

Analysis of the Data

Data analysis "is the process of making sense out of one's data" (Merriam, 1991, p. 127). It involves:

> Systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others. (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 153)

Krueger (1988) describes the process of analyzing focus group data as being "much like detective work. One looks for clues, but in this case, the clues are trends and patterns that reappear among various focus groups" (p. 109). The researcher "seeks primarily to identify evidence that repeats and is common to several participants" while also attending to "determining the range and diversity of experiences or perceptions (p. 109).

The analysis of the data actually began with the researchers' observations of the conversations which took place prior to the actual focus group sessions. Research team members took field notes before and after the sessions, making

certain to include their thoughts, hunches, and/or impressions. When feasible, the moderator and assistant moderator debriefed by discussing the sessions and comparing notes immediately following each session. In most cases, short summaries were written.

The data analysis was conducted by one researcher and a graduate research assistant. The transcripts were equally divided between the two. The researcher and research assistant independently read the verbatim transcripts of the focus group interviews. The transcripts were read and reread. The transcripts were compared across focus groups as well as stakeholder categories. Notes were made of themes, patterns, and trends.

Beginning with the first reading of the transcripts, sections that provided insights and answers to the each question were noted and marked. Significant quotes were noted and highlighted. As themes emerged from the data transcripts the two analysts met and compared their findings. Similar themes emerged among all CrossRoads stakeholder interviews. A typography of themes or categories was developed. The transcripts were then reread. Data supporting each theme in the typography was highlighted with different colored highlight markers on copies of the interview transcripts. These sections were later cut apart and sorted into folders, one folder for each theme.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the technical failure of some of the electronic recording equipment resulted in our inability to successfully record several focus group interviews. However, we were able to reconstruct some portions of those sessions from field notes and summaries.

A second and crucial limitation relates to the difficulty in getting children, particularly the sixth and seventh grade CrossRoads population, to speak openly in a focus group environment. The first several sessions with this population did not

provide the in-depth information we had hoped to obtain.

An additional limiting factor can be found in the participant sample. Administrators and teachers were asked to recruit participants. This selection process may have biased the sample composition towards the more successful students and teachers.

Findings

Two main themes or categories were identified as emerging from the focus group data. These themes not only define and describe the program, but they suggest areas of the program needing further investigation. They are: community, which includes the properties of program as community, connections to the community, and perceptions of the outside community, and program administration, which includes the properties commitment, flexibility, student selection and placement, transition and reintegration, and affective and academic changes. One additional finding that occurred throughout the focus group interviews is success stories. Table 4 presents a data display of the categories and properties.

Table 4. Categories and Properties

COMMUNITY

- Program as Community
- Connections to the Outside Community
- Perceptions of the Community

PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

- Commitment
- Flexibility
- Student Selection and Placement
- Transition and Reintegration
- Affective and Academic Changes

Additional Finding

SUCCESS STORIES

Community

"It takes a whole community to raise one child."

African proverb adapted by a CrossRoads Administrator

The theme community refers to the participants perceptions of the CrossRoads Program as holistic, impacting both the social and emotional aspects of the students' educational process. The Program functions as a supportive community within the walls of the school, and serves to connect the students to the outside community and needed services. Another aspect of community are the perceptions of the outside communities served by CrossRoads schools. The community category is composed of three properties: the program as community, connections to the outside community, and perceptions of the community.

Program as Community

The theme Program as Community relates to the development of the CrossRoads Programs as individual communities within the walls of the school. The Program functions as a microcosm of the larger community, often mirroring structures and relationships found in the larger community. It thrives on relationship building, team building, and maintenance. In essence, those associated with the Program, its staff and students, see it as a "family" or "team." Clearly, creating and maintaining positive relationships between students, teachers, administrators and community is a primary focus. In conjunction with the program collaborative, CrossRoads also serves to connect students with needed social services.

This family or team approach was expressed by the teachers and administrators in terms of commitment to the program and the students. Interest in the students is personalized. Administrators and teachers try to get the "kids to feel a connection to

school that they've never felt before." One administrator stated we tried to "make this program theirs [the students']," in some cases "giving them input" into what goes on at the school.

The teachers show pride in the students' successes. Many described displaying "unconditional love" in their approach to understanding and working with students. For example, if a student does something wrong or breaks a rule, the infraction is addressed. Once it has been dealt with, students begin again with a clean slate. As one administrator stated, "These kids realize that this is not a teacher, this is a person that really cares about me and is concerned about me." Another added, "it's got to be from the heart."

Getting parents involved with the school is an important aspect of the program as community. The relationship with the parents "is of a much closer relationship" than typically experienced by administrators. In some cases, parents and administrators communicate "on a first name basis, "even call[ing] each other every week." Many of the administrators spoke of "basically demanding that the parents come in" with students prior to accepting them into the CrossRoads Programs. They try to "find out more about what's going on at home, what types of problems they've been having before." Parents are encouraged to become involved with the program. In fact, many parents are "connected [to the schools] for the first time. Changes in parental attitudes about their children's' school were noted in several instances. As one administrator shared, "most of the parents you dealt with were hostile parents in the regular school environment . . . . once they come to us, it's anything you want, [they] bake cakes, [they] come see us . . . because we're offering their children a chance."

It is not uncommon for teachers or administrators associated with the Program to make home visits. They recognize that "these students have different issues . . . to work with." Therefore, it is important to understand not just the child at school,

but "the whole kid" including family situations and health issues. However, they also acknowledged that "we can't heal all the issues, but we can make that wound better and then soon that wound will heal itself."

Students are perceived as people, not just problems. One teacher described her CrossRoads school as "a place where everybody knows their [the students'] name. Maybe for the first time in their lives . . . they're somebody." This aspect of the program is particularly important because some of the students perceive the home school teachers as uncaring people who believe that they [the students] will never amount to anything.

Teachers in CrossRoads see the need for respect and caring for the students, recognizing that "we may be the only adults in their lives that they can depend on." However, it still remains the students' responsibility to become a part of the community, abide by the rules, and learn to make the right choices. One anecdote provided by an administrator related a wonderful example of community. Funding for a full-time janitor was unavailable at this school. "One day, we came down, we all wore our old clothes. I brought my lawnmower, I mowed the lawn, the teachers . . . dragged out the furniture. We mopped and cleaned. The kids helped us." Another incident related to an assembly in which the school principal "went into one of my [his] sermons" in reference to some problems at the school earlier in the week. He related, I "told them I was disappointed that they were hurting the image of the school. . . I had approximately fifteen, sixteen of them come to me that day and apologize. They were sorry. The next day I had a card signed by about fifty."

Positive attributes of students are recognized and nurtured. This is important because for some students, "the only pat that they've gotten is a slap in the mouth. No one has ever put a hand on their back and said, 'Good job son, you've done a great job.'" The following example provided by one teacher describes his student/teacher relationship and his recognition of worth or value in these

children. "These kids have hidden treasures that hasn't been tapped in to . . . and I try to develop character, integrity, honesty . . . and I try to transfer my spirit right off into the young people on a day-to-day basis."

The students also expressed a sense of community. As one student described, "the alternative school makes you feel comfortable, makes you feel at home . . . made me feel like I was loved and stuff. You've always got someone to talk to if you've got problems." Another student spoke of her feelings of support revealing, "I know I've been through a lot and I'd say the teachers, everybody will be there for me." Still another related, "The teachers are friends with you too. If you have a problem, they're there for you."

Other students discussed helping each other to stay out of trouble. This behavior was corroborated by several teachers, one who stated, "these kids have bonded tremendously. They're a support system for each other." One example of this bonding took place when a seventeen year old student delivered a baby. "On the way back from the hospital [she] came by the Center before she went home to show the baby off." Another administrator commented, "they really act like a family and treat each other like a family . . . they fuss and argue sometimes, but they also look out for each other . . . older students try to straighten out the younger ones or looking [sic] out for them when we go out a on trip somewhere."

Connections to the Outside Community

The second property supporting the theme of community is connections to the outside community. The phrase "outside community" refers to the local community outside of the walls of the school. Connections to the outside community are essential to the success of a program. Many of the administrators, teachers, and counselors discussed the work of collaborative and the role it plays in their schools. The collaborative serves to connect the school and its students to a variety of services within the community and the schools depend on the

collaborative. A teacher shared, "it's the working together that's the collaborative to me . . . I mean the ability to share and work together to help these kids." The general feeling about this issue was that "we move by collaborative." "It is utterly impossible . . . to have a very successful alternative setting without involving your community."

Community involvement begins with understanding that "the kids that make up the alternative and evening school student body are probably the most at risk in our entire student body and . . . for the community as well. And until we get the community to begin to understand who these kids are and how they impact on the downtown areas or any of the many areas in our community, we've got a problem. Regarding the involvement in his community and the state, one African American administrator shared,

> It has really transcended race and class in the area where I am. It is our kids, they need help . . . a lot of folks are waking up and understanding, yeah, inner city kids or troubled black teens may be killing each other with guns, but this other group of teens are killing each other with Budweiser between their crotch in a pickup truck going ninety miles per hour. . . . It [CrossRoads] shows a commitment that Georgians have for kids and education and I'm real encouraged . . . to see that bridge being built because they are our future. You can't afford to lose anybody.

Connecting the students and community occurs in several ways. First, the CrossRoads programs in conjunction with their collaboratives, serve to connect the students with needed social services including, but not restricted to the Department of Family and Children's Services, the local Health Department, Mental Health, counseling, lunch programs, the Georgia Department of Labor, the JTPA and PEACH programs, the police department, and judicial and probation offices. An example of positive community involvement was described by one administrator,

> The community in our place has gotten real involved . . . one of the banks gave us two of their employees for about six weeks and we did a personal living skills type class. . . our Health Department sends somebody over once or twice a month . . . our Sheriff's Department comes once a week and does an hour long session with the kids on a variety of topics . . . our DFACS worker comes at least once a month just to present a program. She's always on call if we need something.

Other instances mentioned were support by the business community on a school field day. Local businesses supplied drinks and pizza for the school. At one school "a Reverend and some of his members have voluntarily come over once a month just to kind of talk with our kids." "The Rotary club made a plea for clothes, . . . trying to do something positive for the kids." In another case, a student was "taken to the Rotary Club for lunch, to kind of show him off to everybody that this was a typical alternative school student."

Some schools, however, reported less than ideal community involvement. Teachers from one site expressed surprise upon first hearing about the collaboratives from other teachers at the focus group sessions. These teachers timidly inquired, "What is the collaborative?" Others complained, "the local agencies won't interact with the students in school. They want students to come to them." A frustrated counselor complained of "a lack of follow through from DFACS on abuse [reports]" indicating that "they don't take care of it. The child comes back to you and you feel responsible."

A feeling of isolation was revealed by some of the teachers who reported on problems getting substitute staff. "There's only a certain type of teacher that works with these students . . . we can't get substitutes, they're scared of my students. We can't get speakers to come in." This feeling was also supported by the description of a failed open house at one CrossRoads school. "We had an open house. No Board

of Education, no superintendent, principals, just a couple of parents attended." In an attempt to remedy the situation, address the isolation at his school, and connect the alternative school to the regular school, one principal had a staff development program in the form of a "social hour." The response however, was also rather disappointing. Describing the low turnout of teachers and staff from the regular school, a teacher frustratedly exclaimed, "They won't come. They won't stay. They won't do it. They don't want to meet. They don't want to face the enemy."

A second aspect of the program is designed to re-integrate students into their home schools and the local community to help them develop skills they will need to become productive citizens. In doing this, programs get students involved in community service, take them on field trips to local businesses and civic organizations, bring in speakers from the community, try to expose students to role models through mentoring programs, and to career opportunities. They try to "bring in more business people where we can work with these students and give them a goal because right now, their attitudes are changing . . . but they need to know more about a career." One school took students to the Southern Bell golf tournament. The outing went well as described below:

> The young people . . . handled themselves very professionally . . . they had to be quiet and we didn't think they could handle it, but they were very quiet and they handled it. . . It was an outing, but it was a teaching skill because they adapted to what was going on . . . everybody around them was quiet so they got quiet too . . . We need more things outside the classroom that they can tie in.

A student described having the opportunity to go on field trips. She mentioned participating in overnight trips and outdoor activities such as camping and canoeing. One particularly interesting student outing into the community involved a school administrator who took some students with him to the bank when he applied for a loan. The administrator explained,

> When I go in and do my personal business for my company, I take my students in . . . and the bank president turns[ed] to these kids and says, 'Just come in and see me.' He's on our board talking about developing entrepreneurship goals, bringing capitalism in to kids . . . Now they really feel that there are no barriers at the bank and that they belong in those places where they thought they were excluded.

Perceptions of the Community

The perceptions of the community, including the administrators, teachers, staff, and students of the regular school, as well as the local community, directly impacted the functioning and success of the CrossRoads schools and their programs. They also effected the morale and attitudes of those involved with CrossRoads. The previous finding, connections to the outside community, indicated the importance of integrating the school and its programs into the community. Perceptions of the community represents the problems, issues, and concerns of Program stakeholders regarding negative attitudes and misconceptions about the school by local community members and members of the regular school programs.

Examining community attitudes toward the CrossRoads schools in general, reveals that some of the negative community attitudes may have stemmed from misconceptions which originated long before the implementation of the CrossRoads programs. One administrator recalled seeing the Governor on television and hearing him say, "we've got to get harder on chronically disruptive youth." He believes "that's what all of this CrossRoads business is about and that's a problem." Another administrator added that although he has had "overall community support," "some of them [people in the community] wanted a jail and they aren't happy that I'm running an alternative program." In another community, "some wanted punitive, not therapeutic. When they hear CrossRoads, they think 'punitive' . . . we need to sell the program as much as we can." A teacher agreed,

sharing, "They're scared slap to death of our kids. I'll tell you all like it is and they see those kids coming down the street and they run up and lock the door. Now that's exactly how it is."

The most emotionally charged example of negative community perceptions occurred when one group of people were told an alternative school program would be located in an unused building in their community. Ultimately, the program did not move to the school in question, but nearby:

> People in the community, they did not want the hoodlums from the alternative school to come in and get into their school and they said if we put the alternative school there, that they would burn the school down. So that's why we didn't get to move to the school, we had to move to another school. One of the secretaries . . . said, 'Well, we've noticed that we've had break-ins [since the school opened]. Break-ins have gone up tremendously, or increased since the alternative school has moved out here.' Now all these kid are bused in [from] forty, thirty minutes away. They don't live anywhere near there, . . . of course it's the alternative school that is doing it."

For some schools, the use of the word "nontraditional" in describing their school "is a red flag term" which brings "a lot of criticism from traditional schools." In other cases, having the word "alternative" in their school's name creates a stigma. Several schools have changed their school names. "It's living down that reputation . . . Alternative school has a negative connotation, it does to students, teachers, and everything. It's turning around, but it takes people coming to see." Ceremonies and/or presentations associated with the name changes were also sometimes employed to enhance public relations.

Of major concern to those of the CrossRoads Programs was labeling, bias, and stereotyping. One student indicated that "we get recognized as thugs down there [at the regular school]. A teacher related how her colleagues at the home school labeled

children that they were sending to CrossRoads programs, "Oh, you're going to have trouble with him . . . or her." She commented on how hard it was to deal with these "preconceived notions." They get in the way because "you're judging him on what somebody else told you instead of seeing it for yourself."

Commenting on the treatment of a classmate upon his return to the regular school, a student told us, "They embarrass you . . . the teachers and kids, they embarrass you." A teacher stated, "I dislike the stereotyping and the labeling from the other school system and from the other school . . . and it's real tough, I mean teachers are rude, absolutely rude to my kids when I take them to the . . . gym facilities." Another indicated that her students were not allowed to use the physical education facilities at the home school at all.

Teachers and students described similar problems involving lunch privileges and lunch or cafeteria services. In some schools, students are not allowed to eat in the regular school cafeteria. In others, lunch schedules that separate CrossRoads students from other students are employed. In some CrossRoads schools which do not have separate food service facilities, lunches are carried down from the regular school cafeteria and delivered. Often, lunches arrive late and are served cold, "the milk is soured. . . they've sent us out of date milk several times. They don't send you forks to eat with." In one instance a teacher sent a student to get forks from the cafeteria. The lunch room worker interrogated him, "What do you need them for?" The teacher commented sarcastically, "Don't give the inmates sharp objects! . . . We need them to eat! . . . We don't eat with our fingers!"

This phenomenon of stereotyping and bias was common to not only students, but administrators and teachers as well. An administrator related:

> It's very distressing to us that we're constantly trying to reinforce the fact that we're still educators and still doing . . . a vital job to other administrators and educators. . . I'm dealing with . . . one of my locations where one faculty

> member has written me a letter and said that they were very fearful of being on the campus after 3:15 in the afternoon because of these dangerous children that we had in the school. My response back to them . . . [was] those are the same 'dangerous' children you had last month in your classroom.

A teacher told the group about going to the regular school with her CrossRoads students, "I refuse to go back." She continued,

> I will not have them [regular school teachers] treat my students the way that they treated them and treat me the way that they treated me! That's where the problems are coming from and that's what I dislike the most . . . They do not treat me as a peer. They treat me as I am below them because I teach at the alternative school and my kids are beneath those at the middle school. And they [the students] realize that. They're old enough to know and understand stereotyping . . . and when they transition back, that's something else they will have to deal with . . . people talking about them . . . calling them names, and teachers treating them differently. . . . They should not label those kids or label me."

Similar situations were described by most of the teachers and counselors participating in the focus group interviews. They feel this type of attitude diminishes the work they do and the progress of the students. It also damages the students' self esteem. A teacher said, "It frustrates me that the kids feel good about themselves and . . . then they go out and hear negative things . . . from other teachers as well as other kids."

Stereotyping was not limited to the social and behavioral aspects of the CrossRoads programs. It impacted academic issues as well. One teacher told of her colleagues at the regular school asking, "What do you do over there all day? Well, what do you do? What is your job? . . . Well, do you just play all day?" These teachers assumed that the CrossRoads teachers didn't do much work and the

students didn't learn much either. "They've really watered down education . . . it's just a bunch of fluff and stuff. All they do is play basketball and chess down there." Several administrators also addressed this concern. One stated that he gets "a lot of criticism from traditional schools", i.e., "Well, they're not doing anything over there. Those kids aren't learning anything over there . . . there are some people who feel that if they can't be successful with a child, no one else can either with any method." Difficulties also arose with the acceptance of earned credits from the alternative school in the regular school.

> The biggest thing is that the student who has not succeeded all the way through [school] gets to a place wither they can work and they are getting credit. . . we assigned the credit and sometimes it isn't real acceptable by the [regular] school. I mean they balk at it, but the student earns the credit.

The general feeling in the community and the regular school is that the CrossRoads academic programs do not meet the same academic standard or are not as rigorous as regular school programs.

Program Administration

"This has been the hardest job I've had, but the most rewarding job I've ever had in my life."

CrossRoads administrator

The second category, program administration encompasses several sub themes or properties. The properties of this finding are commitment, flexibility, student selection and placement, transition and reintegration, and affective and academic changes.

Commitment

The first property, commitment became increasingly apparent as the series of focus groups progressed. CrossRoads school administrators, teachers, and staff shared a commitment to their students. They described their experiences in the program as "challenging" and "fulfilling." One administrator exclaimed, "I love [this job], this is the best job I ever had in my life, better still, they pay me to do this." Another added, "We're the only bunch in the state that ain't protecting turf. . . everybody right here sitting in this room is looking out for kids. Everywhere else they're looking out for turf." A principal described her experience as "very rewarding" adding, "I look at the students as being a seed and once you plant that seed then you have to cultivate it, fertilize it, and then you see it grow."

As committed as they are, these educators also described their experience as "stressful" and like "having four full-time jobs." Besides the constant need for administrators to engage in public relations, remaining current with paperwork and record keeping has been an overwhelming. One principal told the group that he did not have clerical staff. His wife assisted him in the evenings in order to keep up with the paperwork. Many administrators also spoke about having difficulties obtaining funding for clerical staff. They also reported difficulties using the required computer based record keeping systems. They found systems they already used for other tasks easier to use. The OSIRIS system was mentioned as an example of a system that found easy to use.

Staffing patterns in some schools enabled schools to select dedicated and committed teachers. These schools had "the opportunity to hire people who that's their calling [chronically disruptive children]. . . That's something that they truly have an interest in." These schools did not have to accept teachers sent to them from other schools. This is particularly important because other alternative schools in the state have found themselves "a dumping ground for teachers that do a rotten

job in the larger schools."

Commitment in terms of support from the State Department of Education and its staff, involvement from people on the local level, as well as staff from the Georgia Cities and Schools Program was acknowledged by teachers and administrators. They described these staff members as "available," "accessible," and people who have "made life easier." These people worked diligently to solve problems and provide information.

Flexibility

One frequently mentioned aspect of the CrossRoads programs was the "flexibility" and "autonomy" afforded administrators in their day-to-day decision making. An administrator remarked, "I just hope that not too many rules and regulations come down the pipes . . . I've got to have the leeway to be able to do what I need to do for groups of students and it changes." He added, "I know I have to be accountable, but I've also got to be able to be creative and inventive and do things that will work." With constant improvement in mind, the program enabled them to try new things and alter aspects of the program as they saw fit to suit the needs of various groups of students.

> We can pretty much set our own tone. We know we've got to meet state guidelines on seat time, . . . we know we've got to have certified teachers, but we can pretty much call our own shots. . . I can really do as I please as long as I can live with my decisions and know that I'm meeting the state mandates before I issue credit. . . If I want to have a softball game during class time and I know that I've worked in enough time that I can do that, I don't have to go get permission. . . that flexibility that we've been provided is important.

Along these same lines, another administrator gave an example of the importance of flexibility, telling of an evening program science teacher who was able to innovate and at the "spur of the moment take the whole class down to the

stadium. . . and talk about myths about the moon and the solar system." A different program changes scheduling running a "reverse schedule" sometimes. The class schedule will "flip flop" letting students go to fourth period at first period. This enables teachers "to also see that kid that is so wound up at 1:30, 2:00, . . . to see this student at 8:30 in the morning when they are wide awake and ready to learn."

Flexibility also extended to the teachers. Smaller student-teacher ratios and self-paced and individualized instruction allowed teachers to administer instruction as they saw fit. As teachers were offered increased flexibility, they were able to concentrate on developing new strategies that work to improve the students' affective and academic deficiencies.

Student Selection and Placement

Procedures for student selection and placement into the CrossRoads schools varied immensely. Some schools had complete autonomy over decisions about who would be accepted and who would not. Other schools were required to accept all students who were recommended for placement in the alternative school. Most schools indicated that they had waiting lists of students waiting to be admitted.

Regardless of the amount of autonomy a school had, each one had some type of a screening mechanism in place. Some avenues through which children entered the programs were: assignment through tribunals, Youth Development Center placements, the court system, and meetings with teachers, parents, and administrators. Some students and their parents were required to sign contractual agreements with the schools prior to their admittance. In many cases, a screening committee or panel served this purpose. Teachers, however, were not usually involved on the committees. One frustrated teacher exclaimed, "We had requested month after month after month that one of the teachers be placed on the screening committee and that request has just been ignored." In spite of these screening mechanisms, some of the students enrolled in CrossRoads programs were deemed

to be inappropriate by the administrators and teachers of CrossRoads community.

An issue of major concern to all of the stakeholders interviewed for this study was what we have termed "inappropriate student placements." Inappropriate student placements are students who administrators, teachers, counselors, and/or students felt did not belong in the alternative school program. In these cases, the general opinion was that these students needed services that could not be provided in the CrossRoads Programs.

Administrators and staff feared the CrossRoads schools were becoming a "dumping ground" for any student causing problems in the schools. This phrase was used repeatedly throughout most of the focus group sessions. Students were being placed in CrossRoads who would be better served in other educational situations. One administrator explained, "we are all having to deal with problems of committees misdiagnosing kids and behavioral disorders. That is reeking havoc in the public school system and destroying the alternative school." Students diagnosed as special education students, socially maladjusted, having severe emotional disorders, behavioral disorders, and mental illness, and students with Tourette's Syndrome were described as having been admitted to various programs. A teacher described the program as "a dumping ground for the school systems." She further added,

> I have a problem having emotionally disturbed and behavior disorders. It is very disruptive to the functioning of the program because it is an academic program. It is behavior related, but we are not a resource room type of atmosphere . . . and what works well from what we've seen are those that made a stupid mistake: drugs, weapons, assault. Those are the ones that work well in the Program, whereas a majority of our special ed students are being withdrawn totally. They disrupt the entire program and they're out. That to me is one big problem.

An administrator, also discussing special education students said he was told of a teacher in another county with forty students in his class. "And he said point blank they were staffing them out of special ed and putting them in the CrossRoads Program . . . all we're doing is maintaining order . . . there's no teaching going on."

A teacher told of a student who informed her that he was behaving inappropriately "because a little voice tells me to do it." She said, "he was describing hallucinations." A colleague discussed having very dangerous students at her school. "We've had two students who have committed murder. . .We do have a much more deviant element than we thought we would be getting. . . we're getting really disturbed people and we're not equipped to deal with some of them."

Students also expressed concern regarding the behavior of some of their classmates. One student described "most of them [his fellow students] as having been in some kind of mental institution somewhere. That's all they talk about in class, institutions. . . One dude cut his fingernails where they were like claws. . . he'll sit in class and cut paper with them." Others brought up the subject of drug use, alcohol, want-to-be gang members, and weapons in the CrossRoads schools.

Another aspect of student placement was the size of the classes. All of the stakeholders felt that "small" classes with low student/teacher ratios which provided "individualized attention" were strengths of the CrossRoads programs. However, the state wants "to put more of the chronic disciplinary problem students in the CrossRoads school next year." One administrator opined, "I think they need to rethink that situation because when you have one or two problems in a regular classroom [it is difficult], when you take all these kids and put them in the same classroom, you're creating a monster."

Transition and Integration

Transitioning and integrating CrossRoads students back into their regular or home schools was a primary concern of all of the program's Stakeholders. This issue was also the source of emotional turmoil for many CrossRoads administrators, teachers and counselors. They found themselves, often times, experiencing emotional, ethical, and professional conflicts when faced with the inevitability of placing students back into their home schools. These educators witnessed the social, emotional, and academic growth of CrossRoads students; students who, for whatever reason, did not benefit from the traditional educational system. They had taken the time to nurture and understand the needs of the students and thereby helped them to succeed. They also realized that all students "don't fit in a traditional mold, . . . move together at the same pace, same time, same curriculum."

In the CrossRoads programs, once the students began experiencing small successes and subsequently began to progress and gain self-esteem and confidence, they faced placement back in the same environment in which they had initially failed. This is where the conflicts began. Teachers and administrators were reluctant to remove students from a successful academic situation and place them back into one in which they could not function. "A lot of times, they feel like they're just getting thrown to the wolves." An administrator related a conversation she had with a student who was being considered for transition. He said,

> Get real! You're wanting me to go into an idealistic situation and it's not there. It's not an ideal situation . . . I can't do it . . . What's going to happen is I'm going to go back. I feel good about myself now. I'm going to go back and the same thing's going to happen. I'm going to pop off and say something to somebody and then I'm going to be back here. . . I want to stay here . . . If that's what it takes, that's what I'm going to do.

Most schools implemented some type of support structure for transitioning

students. One administrator described a transition process at his school in which some of the support systems from the CrossRoads schools were employed to help the students have an easier transition process. First, a connection from the home school to the student was formed while he/she was in the CrossRoads program. "I think transition is important . . . a lot of times the kids come out there [to the CrossRoads schools] and they need to know that they're not just thrown out and forgotten about over there." When the student is ready to return to the home school, it should be as easy as possible. Counselors should be there to make sure students are signed up for the correct courses and know where they will be going and who their teachers will be. Orientations and welcome sessions are initiated to help the student adjust.

A contact person is assigned to the student so that "if they feel like they're having a problem they can always go see Ms. Smith the first thing that morning." Additionally, the students' counselor comes to the school. "They'll sit down and have a little orientation with that student with our social worker so that the student doesn't just walk in a new place by himself." One administrator described the transitioning students as "scared." "They've not had success at that school before so they're going to be a little apprehensive, but I'll be there to try to support them."

While discussing transitioning, a teacher stated, "I think we have a good tracking system . . . I've been able to observe, whereas once they leave our program, we've been able to see them back in regular school and I mean just that joy. They're seeing that you care about me and you come checking in on me."

In some cases, the students do not want to go back to the regular schools. In other cases, the parents don't want them to return. An administrator stated, I've had a second parent that's come out and asked, "Can my child come back here next year?" Another parent told the principal of her child's CrossRoads school, " I think he enjoys it where he is better [than in the regular school]."

Affective and Academic Changes

Woven throughout each of the focus group interviews were instances of positive affective and academic changes occurring in CrossRoads students. As would be expected, these examples represented a wide range of increments of changes according to the student involved. One of the strengths of the CrossRoads Program is that it enables educators working with chronically disruptive youth to impact social, emotional, and academic facets of the students' lives.

The administrators, teachers, and counselors all agreed on one point. That is, that the affective work must come first. "If you deal with the affective, the academics will follow." These students have a lot of "baggage." Typically, a student "arrives at school with one Samsonite bag." In many cases, when a CrossRoads student comes to school a "moving van" pulls up. Students who are worrying about where they will get their next meal or where they will sleep that night are not worried about academics. With the assistance of the collaboratives and individualized attention, the CrossRoads Program addresses these student problems and helps the student gradually feel better about him/herself. Once a student begins to feel better about him/herself, he/she has greater confidence, self-esteem, and begins to develop pride. The little successes follow. For some of the students, these successes are the first ones they have ever had and it makes them feel good and develop a sense of pride.

Additional Finding

Success Stories

Success stories, or stories related by administrators, teachers, counselors, and students about the social, academic, and personal growth of CrossRoads students were prolific during the focus group interview sessions. Although it was generally agreed that some students cannot be helped by a program such as CrossRoads, the administrators and staff interviewed unanimously believed they were seeing

improvement in their students. The majority of student participants in the focus groups supported this with their own experiences. The following section presents some of the success stories.

> In talking about success stories, one young fellow came to us reading on the second grade level. He's advanced three years since he's been there. Now this is one that would have been a nonreader the rest of his life in the normal program, but all of a sudden we can hold him, we can support him, we can see that he can succeed, and he can see himself succeeding . . . He's there everyday and he was one that was a terror . . . Absolutely couldn't keep him in school because they didn't want him in school. . . . But just a total turnaround.

> A year ago, we had a young man who was removed from the day high school . . . . he had a weapon . . . . his grandfather called me in the summer and said he was suspended, 'Can he come to you?' I said, 'we'll check it out with the superintendent just to be sure.' And somehow a breakdown in communication occurred. . . I allowed the young man to register and to appear on campus the first day. . . He was not allowed. The long and the short of it was that he was not allowed to return to school until our Board of Education met in March of this year and allowed him to return to me part-time. Teachers didn't know anything about this and he was nominated for the Rotary Student of the Month . . . and everybody voted. He was nominated by all of his teachers . . . even the janitor votes on our Rotary Student of the Month.

> I've got an example of a young man who's in the 8th grade ready to go to 9th grade. He's behind a year. When he came to the school in September, he would cuss, and cussing to alternative school kids is not 'damn' and 'hell.' It starts with 'F'. This kid would fight with anybody. It didn't make any

difference if he didn't like someone or didn't like what that kid did to that kid, he's ready to fight. . . . The kid now is kind of mouthy, but it's not like he was. He's not getting in any fights and he will recognize himself if he gets mad at his teacher from time to time. . . He'll say, 'Before if she had said something to me, I'd hit her." And he would have, but they learn. And he's just one example of how to deal with the situation, self control . . . They don't like to be pushed and prodded and encouraged and discouraged from doing certain behaviors, but they really realized that they have profited by being at the alternative school this year, academically, socially, self control, self esteem. And he's just one example that's more typical than atypical.

I had one young girl the other day. She was wanting to come back and she said that in regular school, 'I got behind. No one will give me help. . . I just can't go.' She hasn't missed a day since she started with us in March. She's there everyday. She's caught up. she's caught up a couple of courses that she had failed and will finish three or four more by the end of this year.

I left [school] in the middle of my sophomore year and I was going to try to get in high school in California, but all kind of legal things wouldn't let me . . . and when I came back to Georgia, I was seventeen and they were going to put me back in as a freshman because I hadn't completed the sophomore year. So, that's where CrossRoads popped in. I could build up my credits and I'm taking double the courses in one semester, I'm doing double time . . . and basically, it's pretty good because it shot me up back to where I belong . . . instead of being a freshman, I'm now a senior.

Summary

In summary, two main themes or categories were identified as emerging from

the focus group data. They are: community, which includes the properties of program as community, connections to the community, and perceptions of the outside community, and program administration, which includes the properties commitment, flexibility, student selection and placement, transition and reintegration, and affective and academic changes. One additional finding that occurred throughout the focus group interviews is success stories.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purposes of this evaluation were to:

1) to provide information about the effectiveness of the CrossRoads Program, as perceived by students and educators at sites selected for study;

2) to identify issues for further research and a focus for future evaluation activities;

3) to increase knowledge about participant perceptions of Program impact, strengths, and weaknesses, and how to improve Program operations; and

4) to develop a qualitative research model for evaluation of the CrossRoads Program which can be used with quantitative approaches in the statewide evaluation process (Department of Education Assessment Proposal, 1995, p. 1).

A careful analysis of the data and findings suggest several conclusions and recommendations that might serve to improve the CrossRoads Alternative Schools Program as well as provide insight and direction for future evaluative research studies. The conclusions and recommendations are organized under the following sections: program effectiveness, program goals and mission, increased staff development, student placement policies, strategies to enhance changes in community perceptions of the program, transitions and integration, and recommendations for future focus group research.

Effectiveness

An evaluation of how well the program works or the effectiveness of the

CrossRoads Program was a difficult, if not impossible task for the research team of this project. The major reason for this is that a definition of success or criteria for measuring success or effectiveness in these programs has not been established. Anecdotal evidence supports numerous instances of positive academic and behavioral changes in students placed in CrossRoads Programs. However, at this time in the program's existence, few students have been successfully transitioned back to their home schools. Additional anecdotal evidence as expressed by teachers and administrators points to positive changes in the home schools based on the removal of chronically disruptive students from the home schools and their placement in CrossRoads Programs.

Recommendation 1: Criteria for defining and indicating success or effectiveness should be developed prior to further evaluative programs.

Program Goals and Mission

During the focus group process, it became apparent that inconsistencies in the understanding of the goals and purposes of the CrossRoads Program existed among the different stakeholders, including parents and the members of the outside communities. For example, variations in the program's stated goals varied across several CrossRoads documents from different sites. One administrator expressed confusion from "the mixed messages that I receive" about who his school is supposed to serve. Almost all of the administrators and teachers interviewed expressed concern that some students placed in the programs were not members of the population the program was intended to serve. Participants also related that the local communities expected CrossRoads to be a punitive program. This misconception, in turn, impacted how the local community responded to the CrossRoads schools.

Recommendation 2: Disseminate information which clearly defines program

mission, goals and purposes.

Increased Staff Development

Concerns relating to a scarcity of staff development opportunities for teachers were raised by both administrators and teachers. In each case, interest in increased networking and idea sharing opportunities were expressed. Teachers in particular, indicated that they felt rather isolated from other CrossRoads teachers and could profit from sharing teaching strategies and exchanging ideas with other CrossRoads teachers. Administrators and teachers both felt that training opportunities were needed for teachers in the areas of working with students having behavioral problems. It was also felt that teachers would need additional training if special education and/or severely emotionally disturbed students were continued to be placed in CrossRoads programs.

Recommendation 3: Investigate the possibilities of staff development and training programs for teachers of CrossRoads programs.

Student Placement Policies

Administrators, teachers, and counselors overwhelming expressed concern regarding what they viewed as inappropriate student placements in the CrossRoads program. They feared their schools were becoming "dumping grounds" for students who should receive other types of educational services. All cited instances of students with behavior disorders, severe emotional disturbances, mental illness, special education students, and "dangerous" students being placed in their programs. Decisions regarding student placements reside with the local school systems.

Recommendation 4: Investigate student placement policies for screening and acceptance of students into the program and the possibility of consistent policies for all CrossRoads programs.

Strategies to Enhance Changes in Community Perceptions of the Program

Administrators, teachers, counselors, and students all described incidents of negative attitudes, misconceptions about the program and labeling and stereotyping of teachers and students in the CrossRoads Programs by members of the home school staff and the local community.

Recommendation 5: Investigate and develop innovative ways to assist the CrossRoads Programs with integration into the local communities and in turn create positive perceptions of the program within the local communities.

Transition and Integration

Administrators, teachers, counselors, and students all expressed concern about the transition and integration of students back into the regular or home schools. As mentioned earlier in this report, there are two camps relating to this issue. One is to support the student and work with him/her to successfully transition back to the home schools. The other is to allow students to complete their schooling at the alternative school. A third alternative may be to restructure the existing home schools to reflect some of the positive and successful aspects of the CrossRoads programs.

Recommendation 6: Investigate the issues of transition and integration. Which model is more successful? Also, can supports be placed in the regular schools that would be sufficient to aid students' transition process?

Recommendations for Future Focus Group Research

The majority of the focus groups conducted with CrossRoads students were successful in collecting rich data. However, researchers in some groups, particularly those with children in the sixth and seventh grades experienced some problems in

obtaining adequate data. The research team members found students in these groups reluctant to open up and speak during the interviews. These students also tended to have limited vocabularies resulting in limiting the depth of the interview data. It was necessary to re-word the interview questions and use more probes, encourage student responses non-verbally, and interject humor to relax the students. Informal conversation and refreshments prior to the group meeting also helped to create a more relaxed atmosphere.

Recommendation 1: Work with the CrossRoads teachers and/or counselors to develop alternative interview strategies for use with student populations.

References

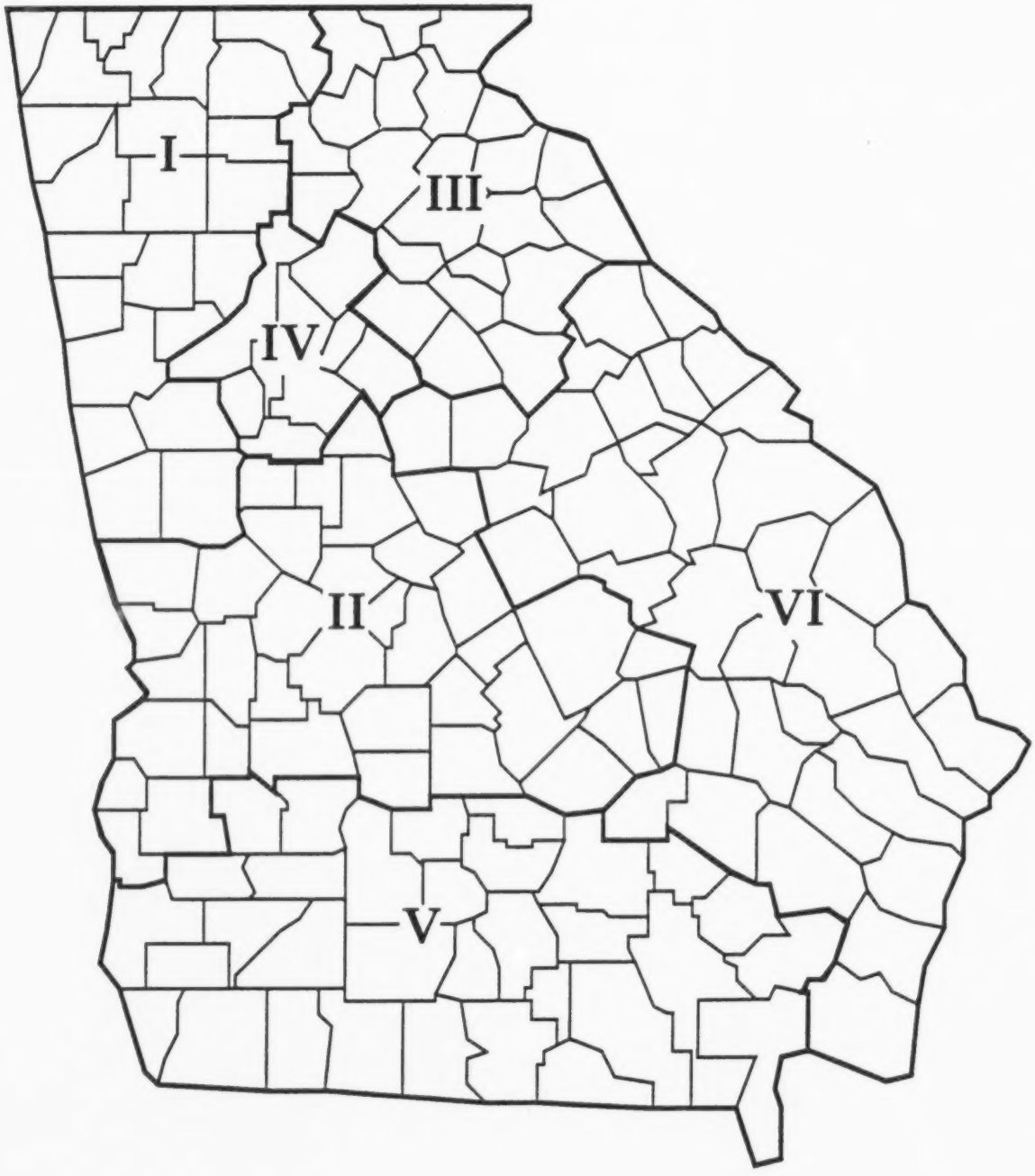
Bogdan, R. C., & Biklén, S. K. (1992). Qualitative research for education. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Krueger, R. A. (1988). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research. Newbury Park: Sage.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). Qualitative evaluation and research methods (2nd ed.). Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Appendix A: State CrossRoads Regions

State CrossRoads Regions



Georgia Department of Education
School Service Centers

I **Maitland Adams**
Executive Director
School Service Center
505 Oothcalooga Street
Calhoun, GA 30701
(706) 629-0029
No GIST Number

II **Elaine Connell**
Executive Director
School Service Center
Mailing Address: P. O. Box 1499
Street Address: 510 Riley Avenue
Fort Valley, GA 31030
(912) 825-6943
GIST 327-6943

III **Russell Cook**
Executive Director
School Service Center
332 Washington Street
Gainesville, GA 30503
(706) 535-5460
GIST 281-5460

IV **Barbara Smith**
Executive Director
School Service Center
1756 Twin Towers East
Atlanta, GA 30334
(404) 651-9660
GIST 223-9660

V **Milton Callaway**
Executive Director
School Service Center
20 First Street
Moultrie, GA 31768
(912) 890-7825
GIST 348-7825

VI **Faye Montgomery**
Executive Director
School Service Center
Route 3, Box 423, Kite Road
Swainsboro, GA 30401
(912) 237-6671
GIST 333-4262

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

March 1994

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

STANDARD ISSUES FOR FOCUS GROUP MODERATORS

Warm-up (5-10 minutes)

1.) Participants can sign first names on name cards during this informal social time. When you are ready to get started, tell them to get some refreshments and come on over to the table.

Welcome

1.) Acknowledge their time; appreciate their participation.

2.) Introduce yourself and the assistant moderator.

3.) Point out the tape recorder - Stress the following:
- tape is for the moderator's purpose and will be erased
- tapes will be used to write up the report
- use first names only

4.) Identify location of bathrooms and water - ok to leave, if necessary; Regional facilitator is there to assist them with their needs.

Overview and Topic

1.) Purpose: We want to talk with people who have been directly involved in alternative schools to get their perspective on how the program is working and what their experiences have been like so that we can understand their programs and how to make them better.

2.) We are talking with students, teachers, and administrators from CrossRoads programs across the state. The information we gather will be used to write a report so that other people who are interested in the program can read about how the program works, the strengths of the program, the areas of concern, and how we can make the program better.

3.) If anyone would like a copy of the final report, tell them to give you their full name and address, and we will mail them a copy of the final report.

* Turn on the tape recorder at this point.

Ground Rules - Say something like the following to the group:

1.) We have a series of questions that we will be asking over the next hour or so. We are interested in your perceptions and opinions of the program. There are no right or wrong answers. It's ok if everyone does not agree, but we need to respect each other's opinions.

2.) Remember that we only want to use first names in our discussion. Anything that we say during the discussion will be kept confidential, so feel free to speak

openly about issues. The report will not mention names and programs, or connect you as an individual to anything that you say.

3.) Some important things to remember:
   a) When someone is talking, we'd like everyone to listen until that person is finished.
   b) When you are talking, we'd like you to talk to the whole group, not just the person sitting next to you and, when you are talking, please try to remember that there are 10 (or however many) people in the room, and we'd like for everyone to have a chance to talk.
   c) My job as a moderator is to make sure that we move along, so I may at times move us on to the next question.
   d) Try to speak loudly enough that we can hear you and that your voice can be heard later on the tape.
   e) It's ok to talk about negative things, but we do want to hear both positive and negative.

4.) Introductions - Have everyone introduce themselves by giving their first name only, what program they are from, and one thing interesting about themselves. Moderator begins - give only your first name, your affiliation, and ONE sentence about yourself (ex. My name is Laura. I work for the State Dept. of Education, and I enjoy working in my garden.)

5.) Tell them that if there are some things that they'd like to discuss with each other in more detail, but time does not permit them to talk about it during the session, they will have some time after the group meets to do this.

<u>INTERVIEW BEGINS</u>

<u>Wrap Up</u>

6.) When the group is finished, thank them for their participation and have them take a few minutes to complete the sign-in/demographic information forms. Tell them that after they have completed the form, to leave it with the assistant moderator who will collect them. At this point, they can take some time to chat with each other.

As soon as the focus group concludes, you (the moderator) needs to find a quiet room to write up your field notes while things are still fresh in your mind. The assistant moderator needs to prepare the room for the next group, as well as deal with any questions that came up during the group discussion and were left to be dealt with later.

Appendix C: Focus Group Interview Questions

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

NOTE to Moderator: The purpose of this research is to determine . . .

- How well the program is working
- What works and what doesn't and why
- What needs to be improved and how
- How the program has impacted students

Please try to keep the discussion focused on these major objectives, using the following discussion questions below with each group.

1.) Let's begin by talking about your overall impressions of the CrossRoads program. How would you describe your experience in this program so far?

2.) In what ways is this program different from the regular school program? (Probe: What do you think about that? or, How do you feel about that?, or Do you think that's good or bad?)

3.) In what ways do you think this program has affected you? Has being in this program changed you in any way? (students)

In what ways have you seen students change since being in the program? (administrators and teachers)

4.) What is the most difficult thing that you have to deal with in this program?

5.) What do you especially like about being a student/teacher/administrator in the CrossRoads program?

6.) What would you like to change about the program to make it better? (Probe: How would this improve the program? or , What about it would be better than the way it is now? or, What's keeping this from happening now?)

(NOTE: If it hasn't come up in discussion previously, and if time allows, ask about the following aspects of the program:

E.g., What about _____. How well is it working? Would you change anything?

- collaboratives
- community support and involvement
- parental support and involvement
- training/preparation of teachers/staff
- teaching approaches and materials
- student learning
- relations with home school
- attitudes of other students and teachers
- facilities and equipment

7.) Is there anything about the program we haven't discussed that you'd like to bring up so that we can more fully understand your experience and opinions about the program?

Appendix D: Sign-Up/Demographic Information Forms

CROSSROADS FOCUS GROUP
MAY 15, 1995 - MOULTRIE

ADMINISTRATORS

NAME	SCHOOL	GRADE	SEX	AGE	ETHNIC GROUP

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON CROSSROADS

1) What we learned from the focus group and case study of CrossRoads programs.

Both the focus group meetings with students, faculty and administrators, and the on-site study of two CrossRoads schools were intended as exploratory research, not so much to provide answers as to identify areas where future research needs to be focused. We hoped to identify those factors which were most important to participants of CrossRoads, to how they felt about their role, and to the results of their efforts (i.e., success). We were particularly interested in what things seemed to make a difference in the outcomes of student time spent in a CrossRoads program. By listening to participants talk about their experiences, what was positive and negative for them at the schools, we hoped to determine what aspects of the program needed to be better understood, what variables should be measured and relationships explored, so that changes can be made in areas that truly make a difference for student success.

2) What research questions emerged from the qualitative data collection and analysis. What we need to look at next.

One factor that became apparent in discussions with participants and visits to schools is how much CrossRoads programs differ from each other. Although we speak of CrossRoads programs as a single entity, the programs are not identical. It is important to understand how the CrossRoads programs differ from one another. We need to identify the variables which describe CrossRoads programs and how the programs operating across Georgia vary. Perhaps some way of categorizing schools should be developed, to distinguish the various approaches used. These variables need to be related to the outcomes of the programs, and to the issues and concerns, to determine which combination of factors (staffing, structure, philosophy, procedures, etc.) in the CR programs produce the best outcomes. Or to understand why some models work best for some students or communities/schools and other models are best for other types of students/communities.

In the design of future research studies, some of the areas of difference that emerged from our qualitative research on CrossRoads should be explored further to see what difference these differences make. The areas listed below identify questions to shape future research.

3) Research Questions

A) **Experience Level**: Is this a new CrossRoads program (first year of existence) or is it a continuation of an alternative school that has been in existence for some time? Expectations, operating dynamics, and outcomes will be different for new vs. ongoing programs.

B) **Size**: How many students are served by the program? What size are the classes? Has size made a difference in effectiveness? How and why?

C) **Location**: Where is the CrossRoads program located? Is it part of main school? separate building? close to main school? at a distance? How does this affect the relations with the main school? with the community? What type of facility is used? How are students transported to school and home?

D) **Staffing**: How many and what type of staff are employed? What is the student/faculty ratio? How were faculty/administrators recruited/assigned to the program? Was it voluntary or not? What is their motivation to be there, their attitudes towards students and CR program?

E) **Training**: What training was provided for staff? How effective was it? What else is needed? How many teachers/administrators had prior experience or preparation for working with this type of student before they started with CrossRoads?

F) **Parents**: What is the nature and extent of their involvement? How much importance is this given in the program? How are they encouraged to be involved?

G) **Placement of Students**: A major issue revolves around which students are admitted to the CrossRoads program. How is this determined and by whom? What problems result from different "mixes" of students with different problems? How does this affect program effectiveness? When and how often are students admitted to the CrossRoads program (i.e., beginning of year/semester, or ongoing placement throughout year)? How does this affect the dynamics of existing classes (disruption of frequent entry/exit of students) and progress of students?

H) **Learning and Teaching**: What delivery methods are used and which are most effective, for which students? computers, traditional classes, individualization, small groups, others? How is the day structured? traditional class schedules, open time, % of time devoted to academic subjects, to physical activities, to social/recreational activities, etc.? Is the learning at a level equivalent to the regular HS subject matter? What measures of progress are used/could be used to measure outcomes in academics, social/behavioral changes, attitudes/self-esteem?

I) **Results**: How is "success" defined for CrossRoads programs? How is this measured? What indicators do we have that students have changed, learned?

J) **Time in Program**: What are the minimum and maximum times for students to spend in CrossRoads? How is it determined that a student is "ready" to return to their regular school? How much difference does amount of time spent in CrossRoads make in the success of transition to the main school?

K) **Rules/Structure**: What rules and restrictions seem to be needed and most effective for students? How are these enforced? What rewards and punishments are used, and

which seem to work best? Why? What does this say about student ability to function in other school environments?

L) **Age Groupings**: What ages and grades are served? Does the mix of students from different grades help or hinder program impact? How? What seems to be the best mix? Why? Could/should the CrossRoads programs be structured differently?

M) **Type of Community**: What differences in CrossRoads programs can be attributed to being a primarily urban vs. rural location? in students? in resources? in community attitudes? in school perceptions of CrossRoads? How are programs different when they serve one school vs. multiple schools in a district, or multiple districts? Are there different issues, problems, outcomes?

N) **Collaboratives**: How are these defined by the school and community? How are they organized and used in CrossRoads? How is their level of involvement related to success of the program (if it is)?

O) **Transition**: This is a critical dynamic to understand, and one which is difficult to study in a new program. What do we know about how students make the transition 1) from the main school into CrossRoads? from CrossRoads back into the main school? from CrossRoads into the larger community, including family, graduation and jobs? How can we facilitate this process to increase instances of successful transition and minimize return to earlier problems? short-term and long-term transitions.

P) **Discipline/control of Student Behaviors**: What incentives and disincentives are used in the CrossRoads program with students? How are rules and consequences of breaking these communicated to students? How is unacceptable behavior dealt with? What forms of discipline work best? what role does peer-based control of behavior play (how do students affect each others behavior)? What do we need to know about group dynamics of CrossRoads classes to effectively use this for student growth and improvement?

Q) **Motivation**: How and why do students change in CrossRoads? What teaching strategies, attitudes, interpersonal dynamics work best to motivate student behavior in positive ways? What works best for which types of students?

R) **Other Issues**: Separation vs. integration. How much can be done in only one semester with CrossRoads program? What seems to make it work is the sense of personal attention and caring that CrossRoads students receive, the positive approach ("you can do it" instead of "you'll never make it"). How do CrossRoads students deal with the "troublemaker" label when they return to the regular school? What would need to change in regular schools for reintegrated CrossRoads students to succeed there? Should they have to return at all? (Cohort model vs. revolving door model, short term/long term). What can we learn from CrossRoads programs about how to improve and reform mainstream education which is not adequately serving needs of many students? Why are students successful in CrossRoads programs but fail when inserted

into regular school system? To what extent is the problem with the system, not the student?